
THE HUNCH

I have a hunch... I can't prove it, I can't be sure I'm right, indeed I could well be wrong, but still... I have a hunch that, sooner or later, the human race will discover that there are other intelligent creatures out there in the universe.

Part of my reason for that hunch is scientific: there are already hundreds of nearby stars that we know have planets, and there are so many billions of other stars waiting to be explored in our galaxy, and so many billions of other galaxies (each with billions of stars) in the visible universe... surely, somewhere in that number, there must be other civilized, rational beings.

Part of my reason for that hunch is not scientific at all, but just a comfortable familiarity with the idea of "aliens" from a lifetime of reading science fiction. (Perhaps too much science fiction, some might say.)

And part of my reason is simply aesthetic: I am not the first astronomer, nor the first religious believer, to see the amazing panoply of the stars in the sky at night and intuit that God's fecund creativity couldn't possibly just stop with us.

It's a hunch.

But the first and most important fact we have to confront in the whole question of "extraterrestrial intelligence" is this: *we don't know*. Of all the planets

we've found orbiting other stars, it's not clear if any of them are suitable places for life as we know it. On none of them, nor indeed anywhere closer to us in our own Sun's system of planets, have we ever found evidence that completely, uncontrovertibly, proves life originated in some place other than just here on Earth. As far as we know for sure, we could be alone.

And so that means that everything else we can say about extraterrestrial life, indeed almost everything in this booklet, is speculation and guess-work. Certainly, some of it will turn out to be wrong. Possibly, all of it is wrong. *We don't know.*

So why do we even bother speculating about such a topic?

Well, for the same reason that you've picked up this booklet in the first place.

Because human beings have always found the topic somehow fascinating.

Indeed, stories and speculations about races and beings other than human are as old as story-telling. Ancient Greek and Roman myths were populated not only by gods, heroes, and demons, but by any number of strange and monstrous beings. Lucian of Samosata in AD 160 wrote perhaps the first tale of travel to the planets, and he imagined various alien races living and warring there. As we will see, even the Bible talks about non-human intelligent beings, created by God.

But there's more value to this pondering than just indulging our fantasies by thinking about extraterrestrial life. Imagine you were born and raised on a desert island that had only one tree. You'd be hard pressed to appreciate just what a "tree" was. Would you think that all trees had palm leaves and coconuts? If you were then transported to Britain, would you be able to recognize that firs or oaks were trees as well? Most of us have experienced how traveling to another city, or another country, can make us recognize and appreciate the things we take for granted at home. In the same way, thinking about "aliens" is a good way to understand, and appreciate, what it means to be human.

I have to recognize that there is another reason why a lot of people are hungry to be visited by alien beings. Seeing a world full of pain, full of disease and warfare, injustice and poverty, they hope that somehow any race advanced enough to cross the vast distances between the stars and visit us must also be advanced enough to know how to overcome all those human problems. They look to The Aliens to be the saviours of humankind.

On that score... well, again I have only my hunches to play. But my hunch is not too sanguine. Consider the fate of the alien in the classic science fiction movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, who came to Earth exactly to help humankind. (It's not a happy ending.)

And after all, haven't we already had a Saviour visit Earth? And look what happened to Him.

(The makers of that movie appreciated the parallel; to make the connection with Jesus all the more obvious, they even had the alien call himself "Mr Carpenter".)

But this also highlights perhaps the deepest value of contemplating, and speculating, about life elsewhere in the universe. Looking at this topic from a religious perspective adds a new dimension to our own understanding what it means to be in a relationship with God.

Appreciating God as the Creator of a universe big enough to contain those billions and billions of galaxies and stars makes us realize just how immense God's infinity must be. Asking what it would take for an "alien" to have something like a "soul" forces us to confront just what we mean when we use that word. Speculating on how Christ's salvation could apply to other beings is a wonderful way to appreciate anew what that salvation means to us humans.

But we must never forget that what we are doing is indeed appreciation, contemplation, and speculation. It isn't science; not yet. Maybe, not ever. It isn't theology, either. It's science fiction, or fantasy, or poetry. It's great fun... precisely because, in fact, *we don't know*.